

Les Cinqs Jours du Mans

Trevor Tarring



Photo: Doug Campbell

2006 has been a good year for last-minute phone calls. First there was my call to Trevor John when he agreed to navigate for me on the Measham at less than 24 hours' notice and got us in the money despite my sluggish driving. Then Alastair Pugh rang: "Would you like to go to Le Mans? There's a place for you in Steve Stanton's transporter, ferry's all booked and room arranged". "When?" "Tomorrow". It took a few minutes to decide three diary items were unimportant. "When's he leaving?" said Marjorie. "Knowing Alastair, six o'clock in the morning", I said.

But in fact the rendezvous at Alastair's was for 3-4 pm. Depending on the arrival of tomorrow morning's post, said Alastair, I would either find him frantically finishing off fitting a new brake master cylinder, or he would be packing it up to take with us to be frantically fitted at the circuit. Four years ago Alastair drove Alan Dunkerley's Le Mans Rep in the historic curtain-raiser to the 24 hour race and got the bug for this biennial event. With the 328 now going like the wind, this was obviously again the car to take.

With responsibility for little more than my passport and money, I trundled down to Alastair's in the Exeter and arrived to find him cutting the grass! Turned out the new master cylinder had arrived at 8am and was fitted, bled and tested before lunch. Drums had been on and off several times in the preceding week so great things were hoped for. In preparation for Steve's arrival, Alastair set up a lavish cream tea, after which we took the transporter (a Mercedes Sprinter such as you normally see, fitted with windows, taking church outings to the seaside) to fill three jerry cans with petrol for the 328. Unbelievably, historics have no access to fuel at the circuit. The local Tesco's supplies 99 octane fuel, the only catch with which is that it is suspected of being dirty, so all would have to be filtered through some old tights that were Marjorie's contribution to the proceedings. *(Sorry, no photos provided for this one! - Ed.)*

Winched the 328 on to the transporter, marvelling at Mercedes' prescience in making the rear doors just 1" wider than the spats over its back wheels. Proceeded to the south Hampshire centre of 'Nashing at Clanfield for sociable meal with Peter Cobb and on to Portsmouth

harbour. Steve has a very superior sat.nav. which was instructed to get us to the ferry by the shortest route, and did so, thereby testing our nerves as we trundled through miles of featureless suburbs. Signed on at LD Lines, essentially a lorry transport ferry, and waited ... and waited. Half an hour after sailing time, we were the last vehicle to board. Passed a rather chilly night in airline seats.

The boat arrived in Le Havre on time and we leaped into action, only to run into the biggest traffic chaos imaginable. Directed by helpfully gesticulating ferry official to an alternative exit, we plunged into the unknown, appealing to sat.nav. for help. Half an hour later we were clearing the city towards the Pont de Normandie.

Frustrated to find from the 2006 AA map that the extension of autoroute 28 north of Alençon was not yet operative, we set off for Lisieux, deviating off the N road for a coffee and croissants in a little village. As we found on the way back, the map lied and we could have got down a good half hour more quickly. Learned to appreciate the capabilities of the Sprinter, as driven by Steve, with over a ton of car and tools in the back.

At the circuit, we signed on and decanted the 328 in its stall in the paddock. Time to remove the windscreen, which on a 328 seems to involve 47 different parts, some rather small, which have to be taken in strict order. Chatted to our neighbours with a German 328 with double roll bar. Their English was excellent. Made our first of many visits to the bar of Motoring Legends for light lunch. Among the photographs of the previous Historic race on display was one of Alastair well outside the track in a shower of gravel. We then began catching up with other Chain Gangers. First of these was Rob Beebee who had driven down in his staccato TT Rep, suffering a failed and partly-cooked dynamo and/or regulator en route and finishing with a clutch



explosion in the tunnel into the circuit. No reason for the latter being found (he puts his trust in hockey-stick toggles), it was all being put back. And for more noise the silencer was being replaced with an open tailpipe. (*Hoorab! Good man! – Ed.*)

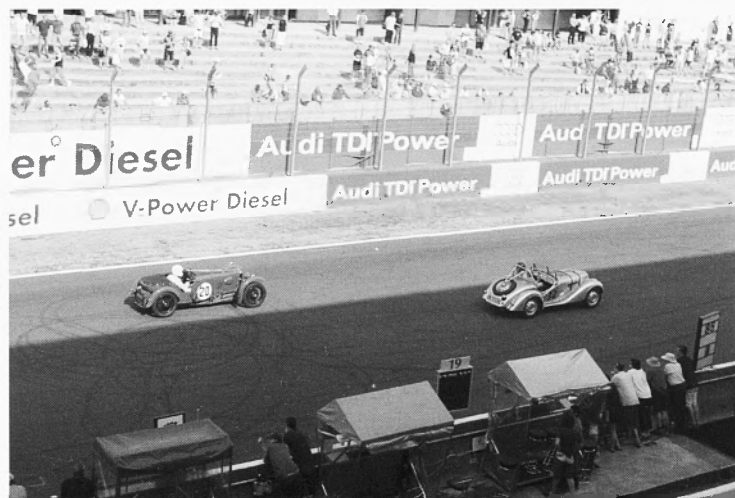
Patrick and Simon B-E were in evidence. Patrick was to drive one of three cars, he knew not which. In the event it was an 1100cc just post-war HRG and he had a rather unsatisfying race. Simon was looking forward to the arrival of Jo Waterfield the next morning. Next was the familiar face of Terry Rogers who had a paddock marshalling job en route to scrutineering at a hillclimb further south. And so to our farmhouse accommodation a rural half hour's drive away, where Alastair and Steve had stayed last year. Greeted like old friends, we soon settled into pre-dinner drinks with our hosts before enjoying a cordon bleu dinner with quality wines and 20 year old Calvados.

Up early for practice next morning, which started with a drivers' briefing from second-generation Bentley boy Duncan Wiltshire. After a few words of greeting in French from the deputy Race Controller from Le Mans, the whole thing continued

Obviously an extremely taxing and unenjoyable route through France for Rob Beebee
(Photo: Doug Campbell)

in English with vital data about the peculiarities of the line-up (no running across the track, Alastair was relieved to hear), warm-up lap and start procedure for practice and (subtly differently) for racing. Promises of an orderly, shepherded move from the paddock to assembly area degenerated into an each-for-himself trundle through milling crowds. Finally the cars came on to the track and lined up in echelon.

Practice was dominated by a ding-dong tussle between a Talbot 105 and the quicker of two Altas taking part. Alastair couldn't keep with them, but neither could the rest of the field keep with him. A little further down the field, Rob was having his own ding-dong with the German 328, making up in heroic cornering for lack of straight-line speed.



The slack third gear chain stayed put. Alastair came in saying the brakes were still below par, and in the late stages he was having some difficulty engaging second. Watched post-war historics practice for a bit, fussed round the car, looked at the Village and set off to find a restaurant for dinner. An idyllic Sarthe-side location eluded us, but we were well content with our choice until Alastair and Steve suffered a disturbed night. Next morning Alastair called Marketta and learned that

yesterday the dog had diarrhoea and had been taken to the vet. He decided he was glad he was in Le Mans so could not suffer the same treatment.

Next day was devoted to brake fettling, which starts with removing the spats and continues with extensive cleaning of wheels, drums etc. German neighbours said a two leading shoe mod. solved the whole problem. Spotting a loose self-adjuster anchor post was the only tangible result of half a day's work. In the closing stages of adjusting settings, Terry ambled over and was asked to let the handbrake off. It wouldn't – turned out a tiny nut had fallen off the end of the pawl release. So it was floor out and dismantle the brake, which again seems to involve 47 mostly fiddly bits. I was quickly able to blague a replacement nut from the 105

team and Steve manfully writhed about putting it all back together.

Time to start up and check brakes on the paddock road, and perhaps get a clue on the gear engagement difficulty. Car won't start. Open bonnet

to investigate and bonnet counterweight spring and bulkhead anchorage fly out. Recover all the bits and replace. Then find wire off its spade under the dash where Steve has been wriggling. Start up, drive out. Brakes seem better and gear engagement problem absent. The German 328 sits confidently untouched all day. Back to the farm through really dense crowds for another cordon bleu meal. En route ask sat.nav. to find petrol station, which it does.

Rob Beebee pursues the BMW past the pits.
(Photo: Doug Campbell)

Race day dawned windy and our hosts reported storms forecast, but it stayed hot and dry. This time progress to the assembly area was fully under control though the crowds were thicker than ever. Cars lined up in echelon in practice time

Alastair returned, reporting the brakes were better, but the clutch withdrawal had failed, making engaging any gear impossible. *(Should have brought a chain drive car – Ed).*



So it was up to the Motoring Legends marquee for a large lunch and then to the Historics prize-giving. The 105 got the pre-war first from the Alta by two seconds after 40 minutes' racing. Third should have

Once again, Alastair enjoys swooping through The Esses at the Le Mans Legends Race.

order and Rob's engine stopped. His pit crew, plus Steve, jumped over the pit wall and push started him, then climbed back the 5ft. from the track. Once under way the race repeated practice. The 105 and Alta were uncatchable and never more than a few lengths apart; then Alastair in solitary state; then the pack, among which the Beebee/BMW tussle was the most exciting. Lap four was when it started to go wrong, with the big screen showing Rob pushing his car off the track. Then Alastair went missing. Recovery was deferred until after the post-war historics had raced, but back in the paddock returning competitors said his problem appeared mechanical.

gone to the other Alta, our other neighbour in the paddock, but he ran out of fuel 200 yards from the line. With classes for 2 litre, 3 litre and over 3 litre, Bentleys managed to dominate class placings; the winning 4½ had been driven from Edinburgh.



First recovery car back was Rob, who drove back on two cylinders. Bareheaded and waving to the crowd, he thoroughly enjoyed himself. Turned out the vibration from his hot Meadows was enough to snap the front carburettor float chamber off at the neck. He stopped the petrol pouring out by ramming a bit of genuine Mulsanne hedge in the hole. Finally

Then it was time to watch the start of the big race. The superiority of the diesel Audis was apparent from the start. They seemed to have no difficulty slicing

Rob's pit crew at work. (Photo: Doug Campbell)

through whatever was on the track, and all with half the noise of the likes of the Pescarolos from which the French hoped so much. This gave us an appetite for loading the 328 back on the transporter and then dinner in the marquee.

Alternated between following the race on the bar TV, and getting atmosphere but no idea of who was where, at trackside. Left the circuit against an incoming tide of more spectators and back to the farm

by 2am. A leisurely start next day, a speedy autoroute run to near Pont Audemer; a riverside lunch; a smooth passage on to the ferry; an even smoother crossing; and then a logjam to get out of the port. But we were back at Alastair's before midnight where unloading the 328 was spared by sending it off with Steve to sort the clutch withdrawal. It was, after all, not long to July Silverstone.